

## **Kabulis Vent Grievances**

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Protest over government's record on pay and employment also hears anti-American sentiments.

Several hundred people demonstrated in downtown Kabul on May 6, demanding that the government pay overdue salaries and institute fair hiring practices.

Some of the demonstrators also protested against "interference" in Afghanistan by the United States government.

Protesters were seen carrying black and white flags, with slogans, in English and Dari, such as "Death to Irresponsible Authorities", "Death to America" and "Long Live Saddam".

The demonstration, which began in front of the Spin Zar Hotel, next to the information and culture ministry in central Kabul, was organised by Mohammad Sediq Afghan, the head of the International Centre for Mathematical Philosophy in Kabul.

The police were notified about the protest in advance, and officials said it passed off peacefully.

Mohammad Khalil Ameen Zada, the deputy commander of security for Kabul province, said the authorities' permission for the gathering to go ahead showed that they supported freedom of speech and democracy.

He added that security had been tightened to ensure that the protest was not hijacked by "opportunists" bent on creating "unruliness among the people".

Police estimated that around the demonstration began with around 200 people, but their number swelled with several hundred more joining the protest over the course of the day, according to reporters at the scene.

The chief complaint of the majority of demonstrators was that government workers haven't been paid in months, and that officials unfairly hire their relatives and friends. In addition, they expressed anger that so little progress had been made in securing and rebuilding the country.

Some of the protesters also railed against Afghan exiles who had been given government jobs, saying that they'd only come back for the money and were not interested in doing real work.

One of the protesters, Gul Badshah, a government employee with a family of nine, said, "I have yet to get my monthly salary for the past three months."

Workers in other ministries and civil services, such as education, say they have gone unpaid for as long as six to nine months.

Many people, including former bureaucrats, have complained to IWPR that they are unable to get

government jobs because of nepotism and corruption.

Some protesters blamed Washington for not fulfilling its promises to Afghanistan, and called on its forces to leave.

"Our goals are that salaries should be paid, Americans leave Afghanistan and jobs should be given to the right people," said local Sediq Afghan, who said he was not aligned to any particular organisation and had been an outspoken critic of previous governments. "We are not afraid of Americans. This is not Iraq, this is Afghanistan - this is the grave of British, Russian and all criminals."

But other demonstrators said they supported US involvement in their country. High school teacher Ameer Mohammad, reflecting their views, said, "I do not accept that Afghanistan was invaded. It was the demand of the people, because Afghans are tired of fighting."

At one stage, the protesters congregated outside the presidential palace, on Pashtunistan Square, yelling and chanting as their numbers grew. Scores of policemen held them back as they tried to enter the premises. Later, however, the crowds dispersed without incident.

It was in sharp contrast to the violence that left at least five students dead in demonstrations last November. The students were protesting because their cafeteria continually ran out of food and their dorms had no electricity at night. Police twice shot into crowds of protesters, and officials later said the police reaction was wrong.

Asked about the anti-American slogans at this week's protest, US embassy spokesman Alberto Fernandez told IWPR, "America fulfilled all its promises, and helped Afghanistan with one billion dollars [for] food, reconstruction, security and making Afghanistan free from terrorists."

"The security situation can be improved, but it is better than what it was in the Taleban regime ... and if demonstrators [come up with] slogans against America, that is their right in a democracy."

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